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ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes the policies, motives, objectives, strategies, practices, and approaches with respect to foreign language learning in Europe. It describes how policies have evolved from just viewing the learning of foreign languages as educationally valuable and not necessarily a process through which students acquire communicative ability in another language, to viewing it with the goal of learning to communicate effectively in another language. This newfound respect for language learning was justified by two goals: protecting Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity; and enabling Europeans to overcome the linguistic barriers resulting from this diversity. The subsequent policy had two principle aims: the development of communicative language competence, enabling the learner to carry out tasks in real life, and the development of a communicative language competence in the form of plurilingual competence, that is communicative competence in several foreign languages. Various strategies are discussed, as are the many problems that must be overcome in the process of implementing this Europe-wide drive to encourage the learning of foreign languages. The special role of English and the particular needs arising from and the potential inherent in European integration are given special attention. (KFT)

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LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES: MOTIVES AND STRATEGIES

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Motives for foreign language learning: policies and aims put forward at European level

The policies, motives, aims and objectives, strategies, practices and approaches with respect to foreign language learning in Europe are diverse, as are the educational traditions in which institutional language learning is embedded. However, there is considerable consensus, at a European level, on the relevance of foreign language learning to European co-operation and integration and on strategies to be applied to meet the linguistic demands in Europe.

For a long time, the learning of foreign languages – especially at school – was primarily seen as having an educational value of its own, rather than as a process through which students acquire communicative ability. The past 35 years have witnessed a marked change and reorientation in this respect. In Europe, this change owes much to the *Council of Europe's* language policy and successive modern language projects. The Council of Europe's overriding consideration was and is the belief that the diverse languages and cultures in Europe are 'a valuable common resource to be protected and developed.' Language learning is seen to serve two purposes – it is (i) to protect European linguistic and cultural diversity and (ii) it is to enable Europeans to overcome the linguistic barriers resulting from this diversity. In other words, language learning is linked to clear political and practical motives signalled by terms such as personal mobility, international co-operation, respect for identity and cultural diversity, access to information, personal interaction, and mutual understanding. To be effective, language learning has to be for all citizens and not just for a small elite.

The Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of reference* (1996) recognises two interrelated aims of language learning:

- the development of *communicative language competence* enabling the learner to carry out tasks in real life;
- the development of such communicative language competence in the form of *plurilingual competence*, i.e. communicative competence in several foreign languages.

The *European Union's* stance on language learning is clearly informed by that of the Council of Europe; however, it is less elaborate and more targeted and pragmatic. The Commission's *White Paper on Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* propagates the 1 + 2 formula: 'it is becoming necessary for everyone ... to be able to acquire and keep up their ability to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue.' The declared motives underlying this position are economic, political and humanistic in nature: (i) foreign language proficiency is an essential precondition of life and work in the border-free Single Market in general and of transnational mobility in particular; (ii) proficiency in languages helps develop a European consciousness; (iii) language learning constitutes a major element in a person's general cultural and intellectual development.

Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission carefully shun the issue of language choice, the former even more so than the latter. The EU's action programme LINGUA promotes the learning of the 11 official EU languages plus Irish and Letzeburgesch, with preference given to the least widely used and least taught languages. Clearly. the emphasis is on language diversity and equality.

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Strategies

Among the strategies deemed to be conducive to the acquisition of multilingual ability are the following.

Identification of communicative needs and learning objectives. Foreign language learning is related to learner needs and to learning objectives specified in terms of concrete tasks to be performed in different domains rather than in terms of purely linguistic categories as was traditionally the case. This is what lies at the core of the Council of Europe's 'communicative model', developed for various levels, domains and languages. The expectation is that this way language learning becomes meaningful and learner motivation is enhanced.

Partial skills. In order to make multilingual competence more practicable, the learning of partial competences is advocated. For example, listening ability can be usefully employed for mutual comprehension. Related to this is the shift in emphasis from learner mistakes and errors to what the learner CAN DO.

Extension and expansion of language learning at school. If proficiency in several foreign languages is to be achieved by all citizens, language learning has to permeate the entire school education. Foreign language learning should start at primary (if not at pre-school) level, followed by the learning of a second language at lower secondary and possibly of a third language at upper-secondary level. In addition, *bilingual* or *content-based language learning* is increasingly being advocated: the use of a foreign language as the medium of instruction in one or more curricular subjects other than the foreign language itself. An extension of this concept is the creation of European schools in which mainstream education is offered in two European languages.

Physical and virtual mobility. Physical mobility is regarded as being of major strategic importance for language learning. Short visits can enhance learner motivation whilst long visits can provide an ideal setting for language learning through language use. Learner tandems, email links and the Internet are also felt to have great potential for language learning.

Life-long learning. Language learning is seen as a life-long process extending across the entire span of institutional education and training and including learning outside institutional settings. The emphasis on life-long language learning reflects the fact that it is impossible to predict the practical and personal communicative needs people may have after leaving education and training. The concept of life-long language learning has lead to increased emphasis on the following strategic themes.

- *Learning to learn.* Learners are to be systematically encouraged to develop learning strategies enabling them to assess their own language ability in relation to their linguistic needs and assume responsibility for their own learning, i.e. to acquire additional language abilities to meet new needs.
- *Assessment and self-assessment systems.* These systems are to provide encouragement to individuals to further develop their competences and/or allow individuals to have their language proficiency acknowledged outside conventional teaching settings. The Council of Europe favours the introduction of a personal *language portfolio*, in which the learner enters formally and informally acquired language qualifications.

Problems and questions

Although the policies and strategies propagated enjoy a high degree of acceptance and although their application and development is supported by the EU through action programmes, the teaching and learning of foreign languages, notably in the school sector, falls far short of what is advocated and expected.

Problem no. 1: *Limited provision*
Number of compulsory languages: In the majority of EU Member States the learning of only one modern foreign language is compulsory for all students in school education.
Discrepancy between regulations and reality: In a number of Member States schools are unable to implement the regulations regarding compulsory or optional language study because of lack of suitable staff etc.
Choice of languages offered: Because of state regulations and/or for practical reasons, the choice available is invariably limited to the 'majority languages' English/French, German/Spanish and possibly Italian except for a number of states and regions with more than one official language where the study of a less widely used language is possible or compulsory. English is by far the most widely learnt language. European schools specialising in a minor EU language and schools promoting non-European languages are exceptions to the rule.

Problem no. 2: *Qualitative deficiencies*
In a number of Member States the quality of language programmes at school level seems to be unsatisfactory because of the underfunding of education. However, even in those countries where school education enjoys considerable financial support, the results are often described as disappointing.

Problem no. 3: *Lack of interest and motivation*
Languages are regarded by pupils as difficult subjects; they are often dropped or avoided. If it is true that motivation is of tremendous importance to successful language learning, then it is certainly also true that schools to a large extent fail on the most relevant point: to instil in young people a positive attitude to language learning.

Problem no. 4: *Deficiencies in teacher training*
There is reason to believe that much of what is felt to be wrong in language education in schools is to do with the fact that by and large language teacher training is insufficiently geared to language teachers' needs including the needs of teachers in bilingual education.

To be fair, the problems identified are less common or have been and are being successfully addressed in some parts of the EU. However, the gap between the policies and strategies propagated by the Council of Europe and the Commission on the one hand and the current state and results of language learning in the school sector on the other is wide enough to warrant a number of questions, especially questions relating to the issue of language choice.

1. Given the fact that English is by far the most widely learnt language in the EU, and that it has become the first foreign language in central and eastern Europe and the principal means of global communication, should not the main thrust in compulsory school education be directed towards the teaching and learning of English and to

familiarising pupils with other cultures without teaching the languages associated with these cultures? Would it not be better to bring young people up to a high level of proficiency in English rather than to risk unsatisfactory results in several languages learnt?

2. The special role of English apart, does it not make sense to give preference to those languages that are most widely used in the EU or in other parts of the world or both, especially as most of these by tradition have a role in school education, rather than promote the learning of the less widely used languages?

3. Is not the concept of promoting the learning of less widely used EU languages totally unrealistic in view of the impending expansion of the EU?

4. Given the fact that the EU is not an island and that it conducts a dialogue and co-operates with other parts of the world, would it not be more reasonable to invest in the learning of major non-European languages?

One's answer to these questions would seem to depend on

- whether one shares the Commission's view of the relevance of proficiency in several languages (including the less widely used languages) to life and work in the EU, particularly to employment prospects and interpersonal understanding;
- whether one regards the attainment of some degree of multilingual competence by the majority of young people in the EU as a feasible objective.

The special role of English

Whether one likes it or not, English has become an indispensable tool. As a tourist one will probably get around the EU on English. Knowledge of English is a requirement in a large number of jobs. Due to the internationalisation of trade, industry and finance more and more people are required to use English in oral and written communication, and this at a fairly high level of proficiency. Because of this, all young people in the EU will in the future have to learn English. Knowledge of English will become a job requirement just like proficiency in the native tongue. This does not mean that English should always be the first foreign language learnt, nor does it mean that English is all that is needed for European integration to become a success.

The needs arising from and the potential inherent in European integration

If one looks at the consequences of European integration, one can identify a number of developments that signal both the need for knowing other languages as well as the potential for acquiring such knowledge. Among these developments are the following -

- physical mobility in the areas of employment, education, training and research;
- transnational dissemination of technological media (cable and satellite TV, for example);
- access to the new information technologies (Internet etc.);
- regional co-operation across national borders.

To give an example from higher education. The unprecedented rate of student mobility generated by the EU's ERASMUS Programme has resulted in a huge increase in demand for

language courses - and the study periods spent abroad provide excellent opportunities for language learning.

While it is clear that not everyone in the EU will be affected by all the developments mentioned or affected by them to the same extent, it should also be clear that an increasingly large number of people will be so in some way. What is also clear is that it is impossible to predict for pupils learning languages at school precisely which languages they will need to know or precisely what competences in the languages being learnt.

A scenario for language learning in the European Union

Number and choice of foreign languages learnt at school

All children and young people learn a minimum of two Community languages: English plus another language. (If their native language is not a Community language, they learn, in addition to their native tongue, their national language plus English plus another language. If their native language is English, they learn two other Community languages.) Which other language depends on a number of factors such as national/regional regulations, neighbourhood, environment etc. Where possible, schools are allowed to specialise, and parents and pupils can choose from among a variety of options. In principle, every Community language can be studied in every Member State.

Language choice is also influenced by the consideration that the majority of current and future Community languages belong to a small number of language families. The learning of languages belonging to different language families will enable students later to learn other languages from these families more quickly.

Four basic principles for foreign language learning in the school sector

- Pupils acquire a positive attitude to foreign languages and foreign language learning by starting foreign language learning at pre-school level or at the very beginning of primary level.
- Pupils learn how to learn languages.
- Bilingual education is practised on a massive scale.
- School exchanges and school periods abroad are normality.

Language learning in post-school education and training and in informal settings

More and more foreign language learning takes place after school leaving as people are faced with linguistic demands in the various domains. Foreign language proficiency is acknowledged in all formal qualifications such as university degrees. Generally recognised testing systems allow learners to have their proficiency certified outside formal settings. DIALANG, a system currently being developed with Community support, offers all citizens the opportunity of having their proficiency assessed in all EU languages (different levels and skills).

Academics and not only academics will say that this scenario can only work if the conditions are right – conditions regarding funding and teacher education and training in particular. They may also say that a lot more research needs to be done into some of the practices suggested before they can be introduced on large scale. They are, of course, right, and there is a danger that unless the basic conditions for success are provided innovation will breed disaster. However, it seemed to me important to indicate some of the things we should be working towards.